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Under Bill Casey, the CIA is back in business

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William J. Casey, a tall, erudite man in his early 70s, has been director of Central Intelligence since the Reagan administration took office. During the last three years, it has been a rare day that his reputation and character have not been attacked, sometimes from the right, most often from the left.

The attacks have focused largely on financial matters which occurred long before he took his present post and most recently, the so-called "Briefingate" affair involving Carter strategy documents allegedly obtained by Reagan election officials during the 1980 campaign. While no crime has ever been spelled out, ethical violations have been charged. So Mr. Casey, who enjoys Cabinet status, has been a storm center since 1981, accused of all manner of deviltry having to do with everything except what kind of director of Central Intelligence he has been and how has intelligence fared under his direction.

This short report, based on an informal study, will argue that Mr. Casey has done the best job of any CIA director in the past decade. In one sense, he took on the job at a time when the prestige of the CIA was so low there was no way to go but up. Mr. Casey's predecessor, Admiral Stansfield Turner, rightly or wrongly, had a low opinion of the agency he was assigned to administer by President Carter. The United States and its allies paid the price of poor intelligence and, most important, insufficient and even unreliable national estimates so essential for decision-making policy executives. In addition, before Mr. Turner's appointment, there had been a revolving door sequence of CIA directors — William Colby, James Schlesinger and finally George Bush, now vice president, all in one year, an event hardly calculated to restore confidence within the organization.

Under Mr. Casey, a number of important steps to rebuild U.S. intelligence have been undertaken under the continuing scrutiny of two congressional select committees on intelligence to which Mr. Casey must report regularly, particularly about any proposed covert actions approved by the president. In other words, CIA secrets must be shared with some 30 congressmen in both houses and their congressional staffs, a risky but now legalized procedure. Thus far, congressional oversight has worked fairly well, according to all reports. Whether the accountability system will continue to work in future congresses as the composition of the Select Committees changes, is another matter.

Under Mr. Casey, the intelligence budget "has gone way the hell up," as one knowledgeable source puts it. In fact, the overall total for intelligence is at the highest level it has ever been, having risen steadily each of the past three years. Since the budgetary totals are classified, no statistical comparisons can be made. However, to have been able to obtain increased appropriations means that the congressional committees are sufficiently satisfied with CIA activities.

Second, the CIA is back in the covert-action business, an area from which it had virtually withdrawn during the Turner directorship. Covert action is a form of intelligence activity intended to effectuate by secret means the aims of U.S. foreign policy. Overt action encompasses diplomatic activity and negotiations and, when these break down, war itself. An example of covert action would occur if Britain, targeted by Libyan terrorists, were to seek out and support Libyan exile dissidents in order to help overthrow the directing genius of contemporary terrorism, Libya's dictator, Col. Muammar Qadaffi.

Third, there has been a large increase in the number of national estimates sent to intelligence consumers, from the president on down. The whole point of intelligence-gathering — clandestine collection and covert action — is to put together the information collected in some logical order so that recommendations for actions can be made and meaningful policy decisions undertaken. Analysis and estimates are the third — and perhaps most crucial — ingredient of an intelligence system.

Fourth, there has been a massive attempt to rebuild human intelligence — HUMINT — resources. In the pre-Casey period, great reliance was placed on ELINT — electronic intelligence-gathering by "spy-in-the-sky" technology. While much of the instrumentation is ingenious and even startling in its capabilities, the instruments themselves lack one essential attribute: They cannot look inside a man's head — say, a member of the Soviet Politburo — to determine what Soviet policymakers plan to do. HUMINT was once part of the answer and it is now being restored to its essential place in the intelligence panoply.

Fifth, an attempt has been made to rebuild the last and perhaps the most important ingredient in the intelligence schema — counterintelligence. This ingredient is the guard set up by any intelligence agency to prevent the enemy "mole" or even the double agent, from penetrating the inner sanctum.

Kim Philby, the British-born Soviet agent, ran British counterintelligence until he became suspect and resigned. Therefore, during the time he was in charge of British CI, British intelligence existed only in name. The various congressional investigations of CIA and their repercussions within CIA during the mid-1970s led to a wholesale dismantling of CI a decade ago. Whether or not CI has been successfully rebuilt, no one can

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